



U.S. Rep. Terri Sewell (D-AL) and Former U.S. Rep. Martha Roby (R-AL) Full Interview

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Alicia Argrett: Hi! I'm Alicia Argrett. I'm from Madison, Mississippi; I'm a freshman at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, majoring in neuroscience and business management. I'm happy to be here with both of you today. We can go ahead and start with the first question. What advice do you have for aspiring legislators?

U.S. Rep. Terri Sewell: First, I want to say thank you so much to the Stennis Center as well as to you, Alicia, for the opportunity to speak today. I'm Congresswoman Terri Sewell, and I'm honored to represent Alabama's 7th Congressional District. Believe it or not, 2010 was the first time women were elected in their own right to represent the state of Alabama, and I'm so thrilled that, in that one election, Alabama didn't get one but two elected officials who were women. I, representing Alabama's 7th Congressional District, and my dear friend, Martha Roby, representing Alabama's 2nd Congressional District. So, in that one election in 2010, Alabama got one Republican and one Democrat, one black, one white. Both of us are women excited about encouraging other women to think about electoral politics.

I'm in my sixth term, and I'm currently in Washington, D.C., right now. When I think about encouraging others to be legislators, I have to tell you that legislating is a team sport. It's not like being an executive. So, to pass legislation, you have to convince other people to vote with you on your bill. It takes 218 people agreeing with you to pass legislation in Congress. So, the first place I look to when I am trying to pass legislation is my delegation: the Alabama delegation. There are seven of us in the delegation. What I have learned, and what I think is key, is learning to compromise. You may have an idea about a public policy issue, and as you're gathering your votes, people will have other ideas that will change the nature of your policy, but hopefully, it will achieve the same goal. For example, I have recently been working on incentivizing Alabama to expand Medicaid, and I have a bill that would do that. To get some of my Republican colleagues to agree with me, I had to change the nature of the bill. However, the point is to get Medicaid expanded in the state of Alabama and incentivize that. So, for me, the best advice I can give to aspiring legislators is to remember that legislating is a

a team sport and you need to be able to compromise and work with others. That means working across the aisle.

Former U.S. Rep. Martha Roby: I agree with everything Terri just said. When I was thinking about this question and how to answer it, I even went a little bit further back to entering public service and what might drive someone to do so. I ran for city council when I was 26 years old and felt compelled to get involved in my community as a newlywed. God willing, Riley and I would have kids and raise them in this community, and I quite frankly just wanted a seat at the table. I didn't know how to go about it, so I sought out the advice and counsel of people around me who were already in public service to say, "What does this look like? How do I even do this?"

A couple of pieces of advice I would give to young people considering public service but particularly elected office: I would say, first, get involved in your community. Find some issues that are important to you, and seek out opportunities to serve with nonprofit organizations, to engage with your city council or your county commission, get to know your state legislators, find out what policy is taking shape and being debated around you, and learn about that so that you can identify your positions and principles. To enter public service, one has to know who you are; you have to know what is important to you. So, the first piece of advice would be to get involved in your community if this is something you want to do. Know the people around you, and start forming those relationships now because being an effective legislator is relationship-driven. The sooner one can understand that, the better.

The second piece of advice I would give to aspiring legislators is to find a mentor. Do not wait for the mentor to find you. I think I can speak for both Terri and myself that we are ready and willing to be any young person's mentor that wants to seek advice and counsel about the steps to move forward in public service, particularly elected office. I would say you need to seek out that mentor; don't be shy! Don't wait for that person to ask you. Show up where they are, meet them where they are, and say, "I really would love to have your advice and counsel." The more people you can get input from as you make your own career decisions, the better position you will be as you move forward in seeking elected office.

Sewell: That is great advice. My mom, who was the first black woman to be on the city council in Selma, Alabama, used to have a saying: bloom where you're planted. You can make a difference right where you are. So, I agree with Martha and would even go further in saying: consider shadowing someone. When you're young and

you're thinking about various career options; public service is the same way. You can ask your city council, your mayor, your member of Congress if there is a way to shadow them for a day to see what they do.

I would also encourage you to volunteer. Volunteer on a campaign if you're thinking about running for office or volunteer to advocate on an issue that matters to you. When we think about blooming where you are, you can make a difference right where you are: in your school, your college, your church, your synagogue. You can make a difference right where you are.

Alicia: How do you see the future of Alabama, given what you have seen during your time in office?

Sewell: The future of Alabama is bright! I think that is indicated by the fact that you're asking us questions as a freshman at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. We must help encourage the next generation to be civically engaged. The more you understand how the government works at every level, the more engaged you can be as a citizen, and I think there is a no more fundamental way to be a citizen than to vote. There are so many ways to get involved in our government, and I believe that when we have a diversity of voices at the decision-making table, it makes for better public policy. So, never think that you don't have something to offer in a debate about public policy or how the government works, or how it can work better for you and yourself and your family. Getting encouraged and being involved is going to be important for our state.

I am excited about all of the young people and all of the involvement I see on college campuses and high school. I can't tell you how many opportunities I've had to address high school and elementary students as part of my job representing Alabama's 7th District. I'm always struck by how smart they are and how encouraged they are. I think the forecast for the state of Alabama, given the wonderful young folks that are in Alabama, is very bright.

Roby: I agree with Terri again that the future of Alabama is very bright. I wrote that down to say to you; the future of Alabama is very bright. I'll add that, now as a former member of Congress and reflecting on the ten years I spent as a part of the Alabama delegation, I think it's important to acknowledge how well we as a delegation work together for the state's benefit as a whole. We each represent our districts, and we are each held accountable by our constituents within those districts, but at the end of the day, what's good for Terri's district is good for my district and is good for the whole state.

Our delegation, though we may not all vote the same – you can look back at our voting records over the past decade and see that we take differing policy positions from time to time – ultimately, when it comes to advocating for the F35 at Dannelly Field or fighting for Alabama's farmers and foresters, to economic development opportunities and Space Force and our entire defense footprint throughout the state, you've seen the Alabama delegation come together and fight for what's good for our state. Alabama is just continuing to get better and better. With the next generation of leaders coming behind, I hope that what the Alabama delegation has demonstrated will continue in the years to come: working together not just as a delegation but with all levels and with our state government for what's best for Alabama. Because of that approach, we've been able to get some tremendous things done to benefit the whole state. I think that's important. It's a unique relationship that we each have, and we don't see that in every state. We're blessed to have that approach.

Alicia: What do you consider to be most rewarding about your job?

Roby: I think people don't realize that what we do as legislators every day are constituent advocacy and constituent work. People typically think of us being in D.C. in our committee hearings, on the floor with our voting cards, acting as the conscience for our districts. But I think what many people don't realize is that each of us has multiple offices within our districts, and within those offices, we have caseworkers that are advocates for our constituents. So, when someone walks through the door of our district office or picks up the phone to call, many times, they are just at the end of their rope. They have had to cut through multiple layers of having to deal with a government agency, and they come to us and say, "We need help. "I'm going to tell you that the men and women who work day in and day out in our district offices are changing lives for the better every single day.

There are so many stories I could tell you where I've run into a veteran in the grocery store, and with tears in his or her eyes, they have thanked me for the work that the folks in our district offices did on their behalf that was life-changing. I think those are some of the untold stories that folks don't know. I would say that, in my very worst, most frustrating day in Washington, D.C., I could reflect on the positive outcomes that had taken place through that constituent advocacy and our district offices. I just knew that that was truly the most rewarding part of the job that I had the privilege of doing every day alongside the people who work so hard in the offices within the 2nd District.

Sewell: Ditto! The most rewarding part of our job is the ability to help the people who have elected us and the ability to make a difference in their lives. Constituency service has been the number one thing; as Martha said, that is the most rewarding. You have to get 218 people to agree with you to pass a bill, which is pretty hard. But every day, the people in our district offices work incredibly hard to address the needs of our constituents. They do that by being their voice and helping them navigate the maze that is the federal government. That is sometimes helping people get the Social Security benefits that they need, the disability benefits they need, the veterans benefits they've earned as veterans. You wouldn't believe the red tape that often goes into that. As Martha said, there is nothing more rewarding than being out and about in your district, and people come up and tell you over and over how our district offices have been able to help them. You don't get into this business of public service if you're not a people person, and the reality is that you're judged every day by how well you respond to the needs of the people you represent.

I have the honor, as did Martha, of representing my home district. I grew up in this district, and, for me, the opportunity is like a full-circle moment. I interned in college; both Martha and I had the opportunity to intern with our senator, Richard Shelby. I did so before Martha when I was in college, and he was a Democrat back then and represented my district as a congressman before he was our senator. So, to have the chance 20+ years later to become a member of Congress is a great honor and a huge responsibility, and one that neither one of us takes lightly. We know that the people back home are counting on us to be their voice. They can't come up to Washington and speak at committees and advocate in front of elected officials, so they count on us to do that. There are so many ways that one does it, but it's gratifying when we can do that constituency service or when we are helping them get grants. The federal government has lots and lots of grant opportunities, so there is nothing more rewarding than to help a nonprofit group be able to get access to federal funds. Those funds are out there; we need to make sure we get our fair share in our districts. So, shoutout to all of the district congressional staff all across the state of Alabama; they are critically important to make sure that we're helping the people of Alabama.

Roby: Absolutely.

Alicia: How do you think people from my generation will shape the world in the future?

Roby: I would say Terri and I are counting on you. One of the reasons that Terri and I think it's so important that we have the responsibility to even engage in this way with you today is to encourage you. Your generation has a whole different skill set and experience from how we grew up and the world in which we grew up with all of the technology that you all know how to maneuver. It has become innate in your generation to know how to do these things and continue moving us in the right direction. Again, I would say there is also a benefit in relying on the institutional knowledge and those that have gone before you. That is our responsibility to you: to make ourselves available as mentors and advisors so that as you do maneuver through the world around you, you have people and their experiences that you can lean on. Some things don't change, whether technological advances or not, and you have a pool of people to draw from to help you through that.

As we said, the future of Alabama is bright. It's bright because, like Terri said, of the generation coming behind us and all that you bring, all of your talents, all of your abilities, and your willingness to step up to the plate. But you have to have people like us cheer you on and give you the support you need to make those decisions. Again, I can't emphasize this enough: we are counting on you. With that comes the responsibility on our part as well.

Sewell: Absolutely. You know they say that if you don't know your history, you are doomed to repeat bad parts of your history. I think that representing Alabama's 7th District of Birmingham, Montgomery, and my hometown of Selma, part of my job is not just to advance further the people who are in my district now but also to make sure that we reward and honor the amazing legacy that is in Alabama. I know we are both very proud that it was ordinary Alabamians in Montgomery and Birmingham and Selma that helped this country live up to its constitutional ideals of equality and justice for all. To walk the halls of Congress where civil rights laws were passed, where voting rights laws were passed, is a huge honor, but it also reminds me that we have to protect that legacy.

Every generation has to fight and fight again to maintain the progress we currently have and then advance it. So, the next generation will be doing cybersecurity because we now have the internet; they will be dealing with the flaws that exist and trying to figure out some guard rails and safeguards around the internet and its uses, as well as its abuses, is something that is going to come out in Congress. Why? Because we need national policy around that.

I'm honored and know that Martha is too. We were able to work with John Lewis,

who every year would come back on a pilgrimage through our district and our state to remind people of the importance of civic engagement and political participation. I don't want to get too teary-eyed, but I think it's important that we remember and learn from our past. What was amazing about those civil rights activists is that they were strategists; they had a genius about the fact that it was a nonviolent protest, which was one of the appeals of it. So, we come from a very rich history, and I think it's incumbent upon all of us to know that history, to protect that history and move things forward, but also to honor the past so that we don't repeat it. We also have to realize that progress is elusive, so every generation has its part to play in that.

We have to tell our own stories as Southerners. If we don't tell our stories, other people will tell them, and they may not get it right. Even the most painful parts of our history, we must embrace and tell those stories but also remember those legacies and pay it forward, and that's what your generation has an opportunity to do.

Roby: As I said, I feel like you have so much to offer, and we have to be willing to be there to bring you along and make ourselves available. As I mentioned before, you guys have grown up in a world that is still very foreign to us in a lot of ways. We have a lot to learn from you because of that. Collectively, we each have a responsibility to help the next generation in their endeavors and make ourselves available. To those watching this, and I think Terri would agree, I say out loud: I make myself available to you, and I'm pretty easy to find. If someone sees this and wants the ability to have a conversation, to lean on us, we are here for that because we are counting on you. As the next generation comes behind us, we count on you to step up and lead, but we are here to give you the tools to know how to do that.

Sewell: In fact, I think from both of our stories, you understand that you have to see it to know that you can achieve it and be it. Long before we ran for Congress, we had to know in our hearts that we could be a congressperson. That experience of interning with our former congressperson and senators was invaluable in giving us a glimpse at what is possible.

Alicia: How do you see bipartisanship taking form in the future?

Roby: The thing that makes me the saddest is that the American people don't have an inside view of how much we like each other. Every day that I was in Congress, I was working with my colleagues across the aisle on something, if not multiple

things, at the same time. I had the privilege during seven years of my time in Congress to serve on the Appropriations Committee, and I will tell you that the work in that committee was, the majority of the time, bipartisan in nature. We respected each other, and we treated each other with kindness. Yes, we were passionate advocates for our positions when there were differences of opinions, but we could all go out to dinner with each other and be friends.

Nothing demonstrates that more than my relationship with Terri. Terri is not just a member of the Alabama delegation; Terri is one of my dearest friends. Terri and I have the benefit of, over our time together as legislators, working together for the betterment of Alabama, but we also made a point to spend time with each other and be friends, knowing about each other's families and knowing what's going on in each other's lives. We joke that we would spend the first few minutes talking about policy at dinner and then spend the rest of the time talking about our families and what's going on in our lives. I'll tell you: the benefit of those first few minutes talking about policy was to say to my friend Terri, "I know you and I disagree about this particular issue, so help me understand where you're coming from because I feel like if I can understand where you're coming from, then it may change my perspective or it may at least give me an understanding as to why we are taking differing positions on a piece of legislation."

It really saddens me, particularly in recent days, that what was being projected on our nation and the world was not necessarily reality, that it was just all partisan all of the time. That's not the case. We genuinely have real relationships and care about each other, and treat each other with respect. Sometimes, it's the loudest voices on both sides that create a narrative that is not representative of the whole. What is representative of the whole is that we really do work well together. We try not just to understand each other's perspectives but to know each other as people, not just a policymaker putting their voting card in the voting box. It's more than that, and it's deeper than that. I wish there were a way to convey that to the American people because I think that would give people hope to see these real relationships that exist, like the friendship I have with Terri.

Sewell: Well said, Martha. I think that politics, because we now have the internet and social media, is 24/7 all of the time. You can actually decide you're only going to watch one channel or only hear from one voice. What saddens me when I think about your generation is that politics has gotten such a bad rap. It's really a public service; that's what it is. I couldn't agree more that the reality is that we figure out items to get to know each other as people. We respect each other as people; we don't see parties, we don't see red or blue. You see Martha. Martha, who is married

to Riley. Martha, who has two children. It humanizes the real issues you're tackling for the American people.

These are all real issues: everything about how we spend our defense money, how we allocate resources during this pandemic, how we equitably roll-out vaccinations. These are real issues. So, what bipartisanship is, in my opinion, is getting to know my colleagues as people and trying very hard to understand how we can find common ground. I know in my heart that Martha wants what is best for the people of the 2nd Congressional District, and she knows that I want the best for the people of the 7th Congressional District of Alabama. We both want the best for Alabama. We all benefit when Alabama is uplifted as a state and can grow. So we have to understand what motivates people and try to understand where they are coming from on an issue. If you have the opportunity to get to know them, you don't question the goal. Both of us want more, better education for the kids in our districts. Period, full stop. How do we get to that end goal? Well, that's public policy; that's the sausage that gets made. So, I think people think politics is an either-or proposition. You either think you're a Democrat or you're Republican. When really, it's an *and*. There is not a dichotomy- there is an opportunity for us to find common ground because better solutions are made when you listen to one another.

One of the questions you asked earlier was about what I've learned while being in Congress; it's the importance of listening and the importance of engaging and developing relationships. The pendulum swings. Today, there is a Democratic presidency. Last time, there was a Republican presidency. The pendulum swings, but our job remains the same. My job is, no matter who is in the White House, no matter who controls the House or the Senate, to wake up and fight for the people of Alabama's 7th District to give them more resources and more opportunities. My job is to do all that I can to represent them. That means I have to work with Republicans and Democrats. The best way to do that is to try to figure out that common ground.

One thing that benefitted Martha and me is that we knew each other before becoming members of Congress. We had the fortune of being in Leadership Alabama together as we were running for Congress. I think it matters that you get to know each other because you can let down your hair and share why you think we need to increase the food stamps budget.

She's an appropriator; I sit on Ways and Means, and I'm the only Alabamian that does so. The jurisdiction for Ways and Means is trade, taxation, health care, and

Social Security. Martha sat on Appropriations. She's figuring out how we will roll out money. So, when I had a problem with rural water and sewer, I went to Martha or Robert Aderholt, who sat on Appropriations, and they helped me get resources for that. Likewise, when we were under President Trump, the state of Alabama was awarded the U.S. Space Command. Who do you think will protect that now that the pendulum has swung and we have a Democratic president? What benefits Huntsville benefits Birmingham and Montgomery and Selma.

So, I think it's important that people realize politics is a people business, and it's all about developing those one-on-one personal relationships and trying to find common ground. Instead of speaking across one another, we should be speaking to each other, and I look forward to getting to know the person who now has Martha's job. It has only been a few months, and I look forward to continuing that tradition because I know how important it was for Martha and me to work together to get things done for the state of Alabama.

Alicia: If there was one thing you could change about the way our government runs, what would you restructure?

Roby: I think this is a very interesting question. Last Congress was when they created a new committee called the Committee for the Modernization of Congress. In terms of the way our government functions and the construct of our forefathers and their vision for what our country would be and is, I can't tell you there is anything I'd change about that at all. I will tell you there are opportunities to streamline processes to make sure we are adapting in a way that doesn't change who and what we are as a nation, but that we are being the best and acting in the most responsible way we can with the resources we have on behalf of the American people. This committee had the opportunity to look at how Congress functions, from everything like something as small as how the elevators work during voting times to how we do notice requirements for hearings and the amount of paper we use. It looked at all the different things we could look at the American people and say, with the advances in technology, what we are doing to ensure that we are as responsible as we can with the precious resources we have to streamline government in a way that makes sense.

We often hear about people who will say, "Government either moves at a slow crawl, or it turns on a dime." Sometimes, it's good that it moves on a slow crawl because it allows us to be very deliberate in how we're acting on behalf of the people who sent us there to be their voice. However, there are ways that we can create more certainty in this day and age on the way we do things and streamlining

the processes we use. We are the greatest country in the world. We are the United States of America, and we may not always get it right, and it's okay to step back and say, "How can we do this differently to better serve the people we were elected to represent?" This committee and its goals are a great example of how there may be an opportunity to make things better and more transparent, and more accountable to the American people.

Sewell: I have nothing to add. That is exactly right.

Alicia: If there were something you wish they would know or something you think Alabama would have to offer that they wouldn't know about, what would you like to tell them?

Sewell: I think Alabama is such an amazing state. We've come a long way as a state, and we have more to go, but at the end of the day, I know that Alabama is a state with a rich history of entrepreneurship, civil rights, voting rights, and neighbor-helping-neighbor. I think you don't get to know about our state until you come to visit our state, and so often, people come to walk in the footsteps of John Lewis, Rosa Parks, or Martin Luther King. I'm very proud of our state's progress, but I also know that progress can be elusive and that every time we take three or four steps forward, we take five or six steps backward. That's why it's important to have the next generation there to pick up the baton and continue this majestic march toward a more perfect union. We're not a perfect union, but I think that the more you get a chance to meet people from different backgrounds and meet people where they are and not see them as red or blue or black and white, the more advanced we can be.

What I hope people will get from this conversation today is that we're all invested in our state and our communities because that's where we get our education, that's where we go to church, that's where we develop our journey. When you're invested in your community, you can see that your community is an amalgamation of people of different backgrounds and viewpoints, so we need to respect that. We need to find some common ground and know that we all can make our community better if we're willing to do so, and we take seriously blooming where you're planted. That may take different forms. Not everyone will do this public service through electoral politics; some may choose to do it through advocacy. I love the fact that my niece is now "Ms. Green." Everything is now eco-friendly, and she's now doing composts. She wants to make sure we're recycling. That's great! That's advancing and making our environment better. I guess what I'm saying is that all of us have a stake in the future, and all of us have a stake in the environments we

live in. That's why I came back home; that's why I ran for Congress once I got here. I felt very nurtured by the environment of growing up in Selma, and I know Martha felt the same way. I wanted to give back in a powerful way.

I consider this a season of service for me. Every one of us is blessed. Everyone listening and all those affiliated with the Stennis Center are blessed, and we must be blessings to others. That can take many different forms, so the state of Alabama can only remain a great state if the people of Alabama take a vested interest in making sure the state continues to progress, not regress.

Roby: I'll take the time to say that I have nothing to add. I completely agree.

Alicia: Is there anything else either of you want to add?

Roby: As we're wrapping this up, it's worth saying thank you to the Stennis Center for giving us this opportunity to do this today. It's a great privilege to get to work with the Stennis Center and all the work they do, and Terri and I are honored to have that opportunity. You need to know that there are people like Terri and me out there that have served in public service that have walked before you and understand that, because of that, we have a responsibility to make ourselves available to you and to encourage you. Again, we are counting on you, and we know the future is bright, not just for Alabama, but for our whole country because of the generation coming behind us. We want to encourage each and every one of you to get involved in your community. Even if you never put your name on a ballot, bloom where you're planted. Look for opportunities to be of service to others in whatever form that takes. Also, be bold. Find that mentor or mentors that you can draw from to gain perspective about what you want your journey to look like. If you pray that the doors open, and sometimes they will and sometimes they won't, you have to have the courage to walk through them. That's where we come in: to encourage you and be there for counsel and advice at any time.

Thank you for this opportunity, and thank you for the chance to see my good friend, Terri. We talk quite often, but since my departure from Congress, we haven't gotten to spend time together. I'm just grateful for this time to be here and for your questions. We appreciate this opportunity more than you know.

Sewell: I want to say in closing that it is such a pleasure for me to not only call my dear friend Martha Roby a colleague, but it is especially a pleasure for me to call her my dear friend. I think more folks should see the fact that you can be from

different political parties and find times to work together when you can. There are always opportunities to find synergy and things you can work on together. That is really how you get things done in Washington, state politics, and local politics.

I want you all to remember that if you remember only one thing, Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman to walk the halls of Congress, had a great saying. She said, "Service is the rent we pay for the privilege of living on this earth." Public service is an obligation for the citizens who get an opportunity to be citizens of America, the best, most prosperous country in the world. What do we, as citizens, do to make this great country better? That's public service. It's accessible to each and every one of us and gives all of us the opportunity to bloom where we're planted, but can we also acknowledge that it is our differentness that makes us excellent. It is a part of our excellence. That means that every decision-making table should be as diverse as possible. I often tell women who ask me about being a woman in politics the same thing I'm telling everyone else, and that is: make your voices heard. You are a citizen of this great nation, so your voice matters. Your vote is your voice, so you have an opportunity to be at a decision-making table. Speak up and speak out. As John Lewis would say to Martha and me often, "Get into some good trouble, necessary trouble."

Alicia: Thank you so much for allowing me to be here to interview both of you. This has been a very enlightening experience, and I hope those who have the opportunity to view this interview also gain as much as I did today.



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